

# The Escapades of the Desert Fox, What Made Erwin Rommel Such a Successful General, and What Finally Led to his Defeat?

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## ABSTRACT

Erwin Rommel is often identified as one of the most successful and influential generals of his time period. This literature review analyses his strategies and their application in military situations during World War 1 and 2. Furthermore, this paper looks at the strategy of Bernard Montgomery, often regarded as Rommel's military counterpart. This paper then compares their strategies and analyses military conflicts between these two generals and the reasons for either success or failure. Previous research has covered the subject of these conflicts, but most fail to address the reasons behind each failure or success, and the link to these generals' ideologies. To accomplish this goal many biographies and autobiographies, as well as letters of these two men, were consolidated and selected for this paper. The major findings of this paper show how Rommel's initial military success is owed to his ruthless personality and upfront leadership, while his defeat was caused by failing German resources and standards, as well as having to face an equally stubborn, better equipped and strategic foe in Montgomery.

## Introduction

Erwin Rommel was one of the most successful generals of his time. My purpose in this paper is to investigate this success and compare Rommel to similarly successful generals of his time. To do this, I will analyse some of Rommel's ideologies and strategies and the different battles that he has fought over the years.

First I will look at Rommel's accomplishments and life, and then look at the life and accomplishments of a different general who lived and fought during similar time periods. I chose general Bernard Montgomery to fill this role as he is often known as Rommel's allied counterpart<sup>1</sup>, and the fact that both generals have faced each other directly, and under similar circumstances, on the battlefield, it is possible to do a far more conclusive case study.

I am trying to learn about the role that Erwin Rommel played in the ranks of the Third Reich, and his unnatural success warrants investigation. Rommel is known for his unique leadership strategies in comparison to other generals of his time. His unique success is important to analyse as it highlights weaknesses in military systems. Rommel's leadership and personality also led to his meteoric rise within the German military complex, another factor that makes it important to study his success.

I believe that this topic is important to look into as Erwin Rommel was a very successful military general, and pioneered lots of German strategies during world war 2. His role in the war went further than just a general, and he was a proponent of a more modern type of warfare reliant on coordination and technology.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Butler, Daniel Allen (2015). *Field Marshal: The Life and Death of Erwin Rommel*

<sup>2</sup> Hoffmann, Peter (1996). *History of the German Resistance, 1933–1945*

## Sources, methods and databases.

### Databases

- Jstor ([jstor.org](http://jstor.org))
- Google Scholar ([scholar.google.com](http://scholar.google.com))
- Muse ([muse.jhu.edu](http://muse.jhu.edu))
- Google books ([books.google.com](http://books.google.com))

### Search Filters Used:

Find Articles with all of the words [*Erwin Rommel, World War two*]

With the exact phrase [-]

With at least one of the words [*Tactics, strategies, plans, battles*]

Without the words [-]

Where my words occur (*Anywhere in the article*)

Return articles authored by: -

Return articles published in: -

Return articles dated between: 1945\*<sup>3</sup> - 2020

Find Articles with all of the words [*Bernard Montgomery*]

With the exact phrase [-]

With at least one of the words [*Tactics, strategies, plans, battles*]

Without the words [-]

Where my words occur (*Anywhere in the article*)

Return articles authored by: -

Return articles published in: -

Return articles dated between: 1945 - 2020

Keywords [*Bernard Montgomery*]

With at least one of the words [*letters, manuscripts, diary, journals*]

### Search Criteria

The papers that were collected and investigated include detailed summaries of either Rommel's or Montgomery's military endeavours, and in some cases an analysis of the tactics and strategies used. I searched for unique properties in the warfare methods of Rommel and Montgomery and its correlation to their success or defeat. The texts that returned included books by multiple historians that made mention of the famous face-off, as well as different forms of articles that compiled lists of successful military leaders. Most of these articles contained detailed information on tactics and strategies based off the authors military knowledge or analysis of the different personal texts and memoirs of Montgomery and Rommel

### Review

- <sup>3\*</sup>*To avoid wartime propaganda*

The papers collected in the above methods were used for three different reasons. The first reason was to collect and gather information on Rommel and Montgomery in the form of a summary. This would be helpful as any sort of comparison would require a factual and background check of both parties. This information was found in my sources in the form of biographies and literature reviews.

The second reason was to find and consolidate personal anecdotes of either person. This was to gain a better understanding of their mindset, strategies and attitude. This information was found in the form of autobiographies and messages. Erwin Rommel wrote a book titled 'Infantry attacks', and many of his strategies are explained or outlined in the paragraphs. For Montgomery, a different approach was used, not only examining his written work<sup>4</sup> but also letters and reports about him that are publicly available.

The third reason was to look at instances in which both generals clashed, and how the outcome of these clashes correlate with the different strategies and experiences they have had in their lives. By consolidating these three purposes of papers it is possible to gain a well-rounded comparison and analysis of the successes and failures of Erwin Rommel.

## Rommel

Numerous WW2 German military generals won acclaim and fame through the fighting. One of the most famous of these was Erwin Rommel- later known as the 'Desert Rat'. Rommel was one of the most celebrated and infamous German Generals who served as both a tactical commander and as a Propaganda figurehead for Nazi Germany.<sup>5</sup>

Rommel is known for his unique commanding tactics and strategies which possibly stem from his background as an infantry unit in the Great War. Rommel is famous for commanding from upfront as opposed to the general notion of commanding a force from the reserve and made heavy use of armoured tank units to penetrate enemy lines. This strategy was proven to be successful in his encounter with French troops in the Marne and his successful advance on the French mainland and clearing large tactical and territorial obstacles in record time, setting up the events of Dunkirk.<sup>6</sup>

Rommel's methods are, in some cases, in acute juxtaposition to other generals of his similar lead and period. In Rommel's book, titled infantry attacks, he explores all the different times that he commandeered troops and took the lead of soldiers who found themselves leaderless. His aggressive and upfront tactics won him a place in higher commands at a much faster pace than normal.

When Hitler rose to power Rommel was no more than a leader of a police regiment. Hitler, reading some of Rommel's work, asked to meet him and gave him a place in the Third Reich.<sup>7</sup> After being in Hitler's personal guard during the invasion of Poland, Rommel was granted command of a Panzer division in the rush through France. During his time in Poland, Rommel had ample time to examine different German tactics, including the new Blitzkrieg armoured cavalry rushes, popularized and invented by Heinz Guderian.<sup>8</sup>

During his time in the first world war, Rommel was famous among German ranks for commandeering troops and commanding platoons out of deserters and commander-less squadrons. Rommel describes many of the flaws and inconsistencies in the military system in his book; titled 'Infantry attacks'.

Rommel had an unremarkable upbringing and was born to a middle-class family, however, he managed to be a successful military general in world war one by employing unorthodox strategies. Because of this he quickly climbed military ranks and was awarded the prestigious iron cross. Leading up to the second world war he retained a

<sup>4</sup> *THE MEMOIRS OF FIELD - MARSHAL THE VISCOUNT MONTGOMERY OF ALAMEIN* , K,G

<sup>5</sup> *World War II & the media*. pg171

<sup>6</sup> *Messenger, Charles (2009). Rommel: Leadership Lessons from the Desert Fox*

<sup>7</sup> Grossman, David A. (1993). "Maneuver Warfare in the Light Infantry-The Rommel Model" pg316-335

<sup>8</sup> *Panzer Leader, Guderian Heinz*

military role in a national government police force that was the final remnant of the post- Treaty of Versailles Germany.

## Montgomery

Bernard Montgomery grew up as the son of an Anglo-Irish church leader in Northern Ireland, he came from a far more storied and rich family than Rommel, and when his father died his brother inherited the family properties and a massive debt worth almost 1.2 million euros in today's money, however after his brother was appointed as Bishop of Tasmania they continued to live an easy life. Bernard was the 4th of nine children, and as such he did not inherit any family properties or take any form of a leadership role in the family. During his education, he was nearly kicked from school for violence.

Following this, he went on to serve in the military and served overseas in India for a few years. He was then shortly promoted to lieutenant and then adjutant of a British Regiment. At this time the First world war had begun and he had been part of the British expeditionary force that was deployed to France. He saw fighting at the minor battles of Le Cateau, and the Mons; both British defeats. In the retreat, he was wounded by a sniper in his Right Lung and knee, and upon his recovery, he was appointed brigade General on account of his gallantry. When the war was finished Montgomery had been raised to a lieutenant colonel.

In comparison to Rommel during the First world war, Montgomery was severely outperformed. Rommel had won many victories during the first world war and had raised through the ranks at a far more meteoric pace than Montgomery. In terms of command, Rommel was also in command of more men, and had led in battles on various instances, and was a far more decorated soldier upon the end of the war.

During the Second World War, Montgomery had been reinstated to a lieutenant colonel and had secondary command of a BEF regiment. He was responsible for the nighttime March during the retreat to Dunkirk after the successive German victories, and he managed to save a large portion of his regiment and took part in the 'Miracle of Dunkirk'. Upon his return to Britain, he was famously critical of the failures of the BEF and complained about the lack of good command.

After a short amount of time as being the commander of a defensive force on the British coast, he was given the responsibility of the South-Eastern Army; and was given the responsibility of defending parts of Britain. He was known to be a ruthless officer who would fire commanders who seemed unfit and insisted on the physical fitness of his troops. He organised a military exercise involving almost 100,000 men known as Exercise Tiger.

It was at this time that Montgomery was given command of the entire African theatre. This was upon the request of his friend to Winston Churchill.

## Rommel (strategies)

After his tenure as a soldier and commander in World War One, Rommel went on to write a book. His book, titled 'Infantry attacks', highlights some of Rommel's strategies and ideologies.

According to the foreword of his autobiography, one of the defining tactics that Rommel employed was that he was not afraid of changing plans or disobeying orders if he knew that his own information was better than that of his commanding officer. This shows that he preferred to work by himself if he felt that the system was flawed and did what he believed was the best course of action. This was demonstrated multiple times in incidents during the First World War, where Rommel was infamous for commandeering troops if he felt that the leadership capabilities of their commanding officer were lax.

*“In 1941-42, acting without air superiority, Rommel repeatedly destroyed British tank units much larger than his own by striking them in detail.”*

-Publisher's note

On the other hand, Rommel repeatedly destroyed British tank units much larger than his own using precise attacks and strategy. This shows his ability to work strategically at a disadvantage. This would prove important later in the war when Germany was at a large strategic disadvantage on multiple fronts, being outnumbered and out-gearred in Africa, as well as in western Europe. Many German generals seemed to lack this skill, as demonstrated in Russia when they were ill-prepared to deal with winter and were repeatedly humiliated by hardy Russian troops who were able to exploit this weakness. Rommel also showcased his ability to deal heavy losses to the opposing faction during several clashes where his opponents would return from the battle with casualty numbers multiple factors ahead of Rommel's own.

The arrival of general Montgomery put an end to Rommel's complete overpowering of the Allied forces. Montgomery established order and enforced proper discipline and training in the British Eighth Army. His arrival was accompanied by new tanks and guns, and it turned the scales against the Germans in terms of both arms and armies. In summary, under Montgomery's leadership the German influence over North Africa was driven backwards in a mad-rush across Egypt and Libya. After Rommel's failure, he was recalled to Germany for reasons of health. In the summer of 1943 Rommel's successor surrendered the Africa Corps.

Rommel was outmatched and out-gearred, and finally out-strategized by Montgomery. However, it should be noted that Montgomery was at a heavy strategic advantage as he had far more gear and funding than Rommel, and commanded far more troops and military vehicles. At this point in the war, the African theatre was more of an expenditure to Germany than conquest and they could not afford to divulge more funding in support of their flailing Italian allies. Many famous historians argue that this was one of the leading causes behind Rommel's failure. This is backed up in many cases. One example of the Allied forces significantly outnumbering was the second battle of El Alamein. Often known as the deciding point in the war of the African theatre.

Other reports of Rommel outright state that *“No commander can afford to take the slightest chance against Rommel,”* once more emphasizing the fact that Rommel had a keen eye for weaknesses in a military system and knew how to exploit his opponents' mishaps to the greatest extent. This gives us more proof that Rommel has only defeated through smartly resourcefulness and generalship on Montgomery's behalf.

Rommel also had a work ethic that was nearly unparalleled, something demonstrated in this quote from Rommel's autobiography:

*“Did I tell my colonel that this job was beyond my strength, that I had been on the go for eighteen hours and was now exhausted? No; although a tough job lay ahead, it had to be done.”*

He believed that what he did was important and was willing to sacrifice comfort for efficiency. He was a man who was dedicated to his military cause, and imbued this same sense of duty and order into his soldiers and troops through strict commands and ordered units. Reports show that he was strict with his troops and had the will to do what was needed to finish the job.

On a similar note, Rommel believed in making a strong defensive foundation and realised the importance of a strong line to retreat onto: *“Begin digging in before the first enemy bombardment.... Too much spade work is better than too little.”* This does contrast the later blitzkrieg techniques that he relied upon heavily during the Second World War, however, this can show that he understood the importance of a good defence and exploited the weak lines and absence of trenches on regions of the French border and in the North - African theatre.

*“Artillery-infantry liaison must be maintained. The artillery must maintain uninterrupted observation over the field of battle.”*

In later battles, during the first and second war, Rommel used artillery heavily to suppress enemy attacks and aide his own troops. This might show his interest in non-conventional military tactics, which he is known for, and why he took such great interest in blitzkrieg strategies. Blitzkrieg was a brand new strategy at the time and was very shocking to the conventional trench warfare used by the French and Russian generals who were prepared for a far more steady infantry advance rather than lightning-fast armoured cavalry. He strongly believed in an Artillery-infantry liaison and a major tactic that he used in large scale battles was that: *“The artillery must maintain uninterrupted observation over the field of battle.”*

Rommel understands and explicitly describes the importance of mobility and protected large flanking movements. Rommel puts lots of importance into the mobility of his troops and has stated and shown multiple times that a unit of soldiers must be able to dynamically move along the battlefield, and be prepared for surprise rushes and to cover long distances in an advance or a retreat.

In conclusion, Rommel's own writings and excerpts from his own autobiography shed light on his stratagem and methods. Many of these are unorthodox and were looked down upon by the German military system. However, Rommel's success justified his methods and helped him rise up military ranks at a near meteoric pace. Many of Rommel's other methods and beliefs were far more minuscule and logical in nature and explains many of his actions during the second world war.

## Montgomery(strategies)

As Montgomery is not the focal member of this study, so unlike Rommel, his strategies have to be gleaned from examples and battle strategies that he used. Additionally, it would be possible to look at Montgomery's personal letters and manuscripts that have been published online.

One example of a letter sent to a colonel at the time that Montgomery was a major shed some light on the more brutal side of his personality:

*“Personally, my whole attention was given to defeating the rebels but it never bothered me a bit how many houses were burnt. I think I regarded all civilians as 'Shinners' and I never had any dealings with any of them. My own view is that to win a war of this sort, you must be ruthless. Oliver Cromwell, or the Germans, would have settled it in a very short time. Nowadays public opinion precludes such methods, the nation would never allow it, and the politicians would lose their jobs if they sanctioned it. That being so, I consider that Lloyd George was right in what he did, if we had gone on we could probably have squashed the rebellion as a temporary measure, but it would have broken out again like an ulcer the moment we removed the troops. I think the rebels would probably [have] refused battles, and hidden their arms etc. until we had gone.”*

Montgomery was known by both his peers and his foes as a man that would give absolutely no quarter to his enemies. And was known as someone who would assume and plan for the worst possible scenarios.

Other information about General Montgomery includes his famous sense of humour. He would often make jokes and sarcastic statements. For example, when Montgomery was given command of the entire African theatre he was said to have remarked; “After having an easy war, things have now got much more difficult.” A colleague told him to be more positive to which he replied: *“I'm not talking about me, I'm talking about Rommel!”*

Other such facts about Montgomery that shed light on his personality are accounts from soldiers that fought in his ranks during military exercises such as ‘Operation Tiger’, and soldiers on the frontlines during the war in North Africa say that he was always improving soldiers morales and would make a point out of handing out cigarettes whenever he visited a group of soldiers. He would also travel with two puppies, who he had named ‘Rommel’ and ‘Hitler’ respectively.

In conclusion, Montgomery was a highly skilled general who has two different sides to his personality. He could be ruthless and cold but also knew how to raise morale among his soldiers and lead them effectively.



## Comparison and Encounters

In terms of military ascent and ranking, Rommel far outperforms Montgomery, as Montgomery was not granted the position of general commander until the 1940s, and that was only at his friend request to Prime Minister Winston Churchill. However, Montgomery does have more military experience than Rommel. This is because of his multiple tenures in the periods between world war 1 and 2, in various British colonies.

The best ground by which we can compare these two generals is when they are at similar points in time and at very similar situations. Luckily, due to our choice of General Montgomery as a counterpoint, we can analyse multiple different situations in which both generals faced off head-on. To compare these two generals I have selected multiple battles at points in the time ahead of the narrative I have separately spun for both Rommel and Montgomery in their respective sections. Here is the narrative resumed from after Montgomery arrives in North Africa.

At this time Montgomery split his force into armoured units and infantry units, to the dismay of many who believed that he should do as Rommel did, and combine both into single units. Montgomery believed that by unifying the military, navy and air force to attack at a coordinated time he could get a decisive edge over Rommel. Under Montgomery's command the Allied forces were transformed and were said to be more orderly. To secure the vital point of Alam Halfa, he moved his reserve to that spot, awaiting an attack from Rommel. Upon his positioning over there he destroyed all plans for retreat and said: "I have cancelled the plan for withdrawal. If we are attacked, then there will be no retreat. If we cannot stay here alive, then we will stay here dead".

Meanwhile, Rommel was taking part and winning many skirmishes in the regions of Tobruk. After a failed siege of the port city, he changed multiple of the lieutenants under his command before returning his attention to Tobruk and later capturing the city in a decisive victory. Now that most of his threats to the rear had been cleared Rommel turned his attention towards Montgomery himself.

Rommel was forced into a heavy retreat at the Battle of Alam el Halfa due to all of the unexpected fortification at the point. Montgomery famously wary of a trap by Rommel chose not to pursue. The victory however was fleeting. Many of his generals had argued towards pursuit but if Montgomery had pursued, as it was later revealed the German forces had planned to encircle Montgomery with their reserve once he pursued. So in this important situation, Montgomery's caution, on account of either skill or luck, meant that instead of losing a devastating portion of his forces managed to deliver a glancing defeat to the Germans.

Later Montgomery wrote in his own personal diary<sup>9</sup>, that there was a lot at stake in the battle of Alam el Halfa, as British Morale on the frontlines and at home was failing, to be seen as a success, he needed the battle to go differently from the others and needed to win a resounding victory with minimum loss of allied life. For these reasons he chose not to pursue the German forces, having achieved this goal.

The battle of Alam el Halfa demonstrates the very defensive position taken by Montgomery during the war. Montgomery preferred to have 400 tanks dig in into defensive positions behind a ridge, to attack Rommel from their stationary positions once Rommel had advanced on the New Zealand division exposed down the narrow valley that had been mined, trenched, and trapped. The tanks were given specific orders not to advance on the German divisions, and to act more as artillery. At the end of the battle, this defensive approach paid off, with Montgomery suffering only half as many deaths as the German divisions led by Rommel and Ettore Bastico. However, it should be noted that the British Forces lost far more armoured tanks and aeroplanes than the Germans<sup>10</sup>.

After this Montgomery made sure to fortify his position and ship more troops from Europe, this included dozens of Aircraft and almost 300 new American Tanks. After this, the Battle of El Alamein (also known as the second battle of El Alamein) had begun. The battle was the largest allied victory in the war at that point and was a massive

<sup>9</sup> *THE MEMOIRS OF FIELD - MARSHAL THE VISCOUNT MONTGOMERY OF ALAMEIN*, K,G

<sup>10</sup> *Watson, Bruce Allen (2007) [1999]. Exit Rommel*

success. Over 13,000 troops had died, and the battle had ended in just 12 days, Montgomery had predicted both of these numbers almost exactly in a telegraph sent previously.

The Allied forces far outnumbered the Germans at this point. Counting all active troops at the battle, the Allied forces had nearly 80,000 men more than Rommel, their 195,000 troops far outnumbering his 115,000. They also had twice as many armoured cavalries in the form of tanks, nearly twice as much artillery, and according to some estimations nearly 3 times as many high calibre anti-tank guns. However, due to effective command of the German forces, the British suffered almost thrice as many dead and twice as many wounded according to some estimates.

However, many historians argue that the battle was aided by a stroke of luck. The weather at the time had heavy rainfall blowing in the direction of the German troops. Rommel himself was not present during the battle and was at a hospital, however, almost all the strategies employed by the German soldiers had been at his instruction.

Rommel's own plan was very different from the bloody siege that actually occurred. He knew that he was backed into a corner and could not rely on his own forces and bravery to carry the day. He hoped for a quick decisive victory near Stalingrad so the rest of the German forces could rush through the middle east and threaten the allied regions over there so that Montgomery would be forced to dispatch a large portion of his forces in response and support. However, this never happened and Rommel had to face the entirety of Montgomery's might.

Following his decisive victory, Montgomery was elevated to full-time General and made his way across northern Africa in pursuit of the German Army. He had intentionally overextended his supply line to bait Rommel and won a decisive victory against German troops when they attacked his Medical Supply Line.

He then sent out large portions of his reserve in a massive pincer movement, styled after Rommel's own methods. Outflanking Rommel's troops, many German soldiers were killed in battles along the border of Tunisia, with the allied troops being aided by low flying planes, now that they had finally secured aerial supremacy.

This was his last encounter with Rommel himself in Africa and continued winning Africa Back before leaving for Britain. His final encounter with Rommel was a loss at the coast of Normandy where Rommel had a temporary position as General, before the BEF and French Troops drove the German in a mad retreat across Europe towards Berlin.

In conclusion, in the multiple encounters that Montgomery and Rommel shared Montgomery managed to win most of the major encounters, however, in terms of casualties, Montgomery bled heavily while Rommel escaped relatively unscathed.

## Conclusion

Historian Martin Samuels<sup>11</sup> argues that the encounter between Rommel and Montgomery at El Alamein was the turning point in the war; the first major allied victory since its beginning. Rommel was a highly skilled military strategist who had proved himself countless times in the field of battle, however, even this couldn't save him from Montgomery's might and steely resolve.

Rommel is arguably one of the finest military generals to have ever fought during the second world war, inflicting more losses and more casualties in almost every battle he fought. Rommel was a soldier, his book shedding light on his mindset and strategies, he understood that battles were won by soldiers, and was there on the front lines commanding tanks as the German war machine marched through France.

Rommel employed Blitzkrieg time over time, overwhelming enemies with this new military tactic engineered just months ago. In this review, we started by discussing Rommel's life and achievements. This includes all of his different endeavours in the First world war and Second world war. In this section, it is evident that Rommel is a highly storied and skilled general that adapted to the times and technologies of those times very well.

<sup>11</sup> Erwin Rommel and German Military Doctrine - *Martin Samuels*



Following this, we discuss Bernard Montgomery. Often known as Rommel's Arch-Nemesis, Montgomery was discussed in this paper as a counterpart to Rommel. He was considered for this role along with other famous generals such as Heinz- Guderian, Karl Doenitz, Hermann Goering and Wilhelm Keitel, and was eventually chosen for this role due to his direct conflict with Rommel making contrasting the men easier, as well as his impressive generalship rivalling and countering Rommel to a remarkably effective extent.

Then we discuss the strategies of these two World War Two generals, in Rommel's case, the paper consolidates quotes and excerpts from Rommel's Autobiography, and analyses the meanings of these quotes and contrasts them to actual military situations. In Montgomery's case, there is a lack of published writing by Montgomery, so the section reviews a letter written by Montgomery as well as different aspects of his generalship and personality.

Finally, the paper consolidates this information in the next section. In this, we come to the conclusion that Rommel's success is a result of a mix of many different factors. These include his up-front generalship, his exploitation of the enemies weakness, and his ability to adapt to new technologies and strategies such as Blitzkrieg and units of armoured cavalry. Additionally, Rommel is both ruthless and willing to do what needs to be done.

In our final discussion of the conflicts between these two generals, we come to the conclusion, that while Montgomery may have won the war he suffered far more losses than Rommel in a majority of military conflicts, and Montgomerie's victory is often argued by historians to be on account of increased allied troops, arms, and armaments, while the nazi's had reduced spending on the North African theatre leaving Rommel in a sticky situation.

In conclusion, Rommel's military success is owed to his ruthless personality, upfront leadership, and in-depth stratagem. And the reason for his defeat was an equally stubborn and strategic general with increased supplies and armaments.

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